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THE ESSENTIAL MEANING OF ἐκκλησία

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The world today hears a great deal of what the church has to say about Jesus. Equally important, however—if not more important, in view of present conditions—is it for the world to hear what Jesus has to say about the church.

Only on two distinct occasions did our Lord make explicit mention of his church. The references are Matt. 16:18 and 18:17. Some scholars, notably Wendt, dispute the authenticity of these sayings of Jesus, inasmuch as there are only two references to the church in our Lord's entire teachings, as we have them recorded in the gospels, and both of these are found only in Matthew. While this paucity of reference is remarkable, yet the utterances in question are so eminently characteristic of the Christ, and so natural, logical, and essential in view of the circumstances which called them into being, that we are compelled to disagree with that criticism which would invalidate them, and to acknowledge them genuine and worthy of most studious interpretation.

Before proceeding to their detailed interpretation, it may be pertinent to ask: What idea does the word "church" convey to us? A little reflection will reveal that the word is used commonly in one of three senses: the universal, the denominational, or the local. We speak, for instance, of the "universal church," meaning the Christian church throughout the world, independent of any particular nationality, age, or clime. Again, we speak of the Episcopal, the Methodist, or the Presbyterian church, narrowing the term to apply to some specific body of Christians or denomination. Yet again, we speak of the church in some locality or town, thus more completely limiting the application of the word. Underneath this diversified usage, however, there is, in the popular mind, a substantial unity of conception or idea. It is the idea of *organization*. Using the word "church," we understand it as signifying

an organized, duly constituted body, with its own officers, institutions, laws, and clearly defined beliefs. The character or kind of organization doubtless depends upon the point of view of the person using the term; upon the ecclesiastical spectacles worn by the speaker, and through which he views the distant past. The Roman Catholic, the Episcopalian, the Presbyterian, the Methodist, and the Congregationalist alike are apt to project into the earliest use of the word "church" the character or type of ecclesiastical organization with which they are most familiar, and of which they are devotees today. Hence even the authority of Jesus is sometimes claimed for each of these varying forms of organization. This method of procedure is, of course, unworthy of rational support. It is also a more or less flagrant reversal of history. The law of organization is much the same as the law of life. Institutions grow; they are evolved and developed. They are not born full-grown, mature in form and character. To attribute either the broad outlines or the detailed minutiae of ecclesiastical organization to Jesus is, in our opinion at least, to belittle the wisdom of the Son of man in view of the universality of his religion, and to demand his descent to a particularity with which he was apparently but slightly concerned, if concerned at all. Jesus stands committed to no ecclesiastical programme. The popular interpretation of the word "church," however, renders it imperative that we study the meaning of the word used and so translated in the pages of the New Testament. The term is the Greek *ἐκκλησία*, whence are derived "ecclesiastic" and "ecclesiastical."

In classical Greek *ἐκκλησία* denoted the body of free citizens in a Greek city to whom was intrusted the transaction of public affairs, and who were summoned to the assembly by a herald. Hence *ἐκκλησία* denoted an assembly of free citizens who were "called out" or elected from a larger population. Even in the New Testament we find a kindred—or, more correctly, a less technical—usage of the word. When the Ephesian populace, incited to riot against the Christians by the denunciations of the silversmith Demetrius, sought to end the influence of the apostle Paul and his companions, Gaius and Aristarchus, the assemblage is described by the word *ἐκκλησία* (Acts 19:32, 39, 41).

We must not dwell, however, upon the classical usage; for the word does not come to us in the New Testament at first hand from that source. Valuable and eminently worthy of Christian usage as ἐκκλησία is in its classical sense, and admirably adapted from a consideration of its component parts — ἐκ, “from” or “out of,” and καλέω, to “call”—to designate the Christian assembly as the elect or called of God from the larger population of the world, we must not fail to take into account the use of the word in the Septuagint. When, to satisfy the needs of Greek-speaking Jews in Egypt, the Old Testament was translated from the original Hebrew, which was at best a provincial tongue, into the cosmopolitan language of Greece, some word had to be found to take the place of the Hebrew קָהָל, or “congregation.” The word selected was ἐκκλησία. In the Hebrew Bible two words are used to signify a community or congregation—עֵדָה and קָהָל. Used substantially in the same sense, the choice of one or the other is determined by no difference in meaning, but rather by the taste of the author. עֵדָה is, however, the older term, and signified any assembly or congregation, while קָהָל came to denote the specific community or assembly of Israel. For example, in Judg. 14:8 עֵדָה is used of a swarm of bees, and in Ps. 68, of a “multitude of bulls;” yet elsewhere in the Psalms the two words are found without difference in meaning, and denote the “congregation of Israel.” Studying קָהָל we find that it is used in the Old Testament to designate an assembly summoned for a specific purpose (1 Kings 8:65), or one which met on some festal occasion (Deut. 23:1); but far more frequently does it denote “the community of Israel collectively regarded as a congregation” (Selbie), i. e., the national assembly, “the whole congregation of Israel regarded in its entirety as the people of God” (J. Armitage Robinson), as in Deut. 18:16 and Judg. 21:8. A New Testament echo of this usage is found in the speech of Stephen (Acts 7:38) and in Heb. 2:12.

Now, when the Septuagint version of the Scriptures was in the making, some Greek words were needed as the equivalents of עֵדָה and קָהָל; and we notice that the Greek συναγωγή represents the Hebrew עֵדָה, while ἐκκλησία represents קָהָל. This is the usual, but not the universal rule. Sometimes συναγωγή is used for

לְהַקְדִּים, but simply for the sake of uniformity in the written Greek. Schürer tells us that in the later Judaism a difference in meaning arose, *συναγωγή* being used "of the actual congregation in any one place," while *ἐκκλησία* designated the ideal, "the assembly of those called by God to salvation;" and Selbie rightly remarks: "It is easy to see how, on this account, *ἐκκλησία* displaced *συναγωγή* in Christian circles." Such, briefly, is the history of the words. Excursions of this kind into the fundamental meaning and usage of words may to the superficial appear unnecessary and trying, but in reality they are absolutely essential if we would entertain adequate and justifiable conceptions.

Ἐκκλησία, then, confronts us in the New Testament freighted with the classical usage and the Hebrew usage. Yet both usages manifestly have points of contact; the Greek assembly and the Israelitish congregation have in common certain fundamental features. The congregation of Israel was assuredly the called, or the elect of God: called from the many nations to benefit the many. There is an appropriateness in the word, from whatever point we view it, which makes its adoption to denote the church of Jesus both impressive and deeply suggestive. It must be remembered, however, that Jesus in all probability spoke and taught in Aramaic. While a large number of Greek words had been introduced into the Hebrew and the Aramaic of his day, this by no means proves that the common people of Palestine possessed an adequate knowledge of Greek. The fact seems to be that the lower classes had either no knowledge, or at most a superficial knowledge, of Greek, while the higher or educated classes were probably well acquainted with the language. It is only reasonable, therefore, to assume that the language of Jesus was Aramaic. The question then arises as to what was the word used by Jesus in this connection, and what was its meaning.

It is perhaps impossible to answer this question with precision. Certain facts, however, would seem to shed some light at least upon the subject. We have seen that the Septuagint puts *συναγωγή* for *הַקְדִּים*, and usually *ἐκκλησία* for *לְהַקְדִּים*; also that in the Old Testament there was no substantial distinction in meaning between the two. When the Hebrew Scriptures were used in the services of the synagogue, it was found necessary to follow their reading by an oral

“targum”—a paraphrase, or free translation, into Aramaic, the current language of the people. These “targums” at a later time were reduced to writing. Now, in the targums we find *בְּנֵי־יִשְׂרָאֵל* used for *עַם*, and generally *קְהֵלָה* for *קָהָל*. It is quite probable that Jesus used one of these words. Which word the Master selected it is, of course, impossible now to determine. The choice of one or the other, however, in no wise affects the idea entertained by Jesus, inasmuch as both words designate the same thing—the “congregation of Israel.”

The selection, then, of *ἐκκλησία*, when the Aramaic sayings of Jesus were translated into Greek for gentile use, would appear most natural under the existing circumstances. *Συναγωγή* had come to have distinctly Jewish associations, which unfitted it for Christian usage, while *ἐκκλησία*, from its use in the Septuagint—and perhaps from its consonance with Greek ideas—was most happily adapted to express the pre-eminent idea of the Christian church as the called of God.

The word touched, in vital manner, both the gentile and the Jewish world. It would appeal to both with subtle power. And especially was the choice of *ἐκκλησία* natural, in view of the fact that already this term had become widely established as a description of the local organizations of the Christians. Hence *ἐκκλησία* was used to translate the Aramaic word which Jesus himself had employed to denote his church.

The word used, then, suggests to our mind the ancient congregation of Israel, if we think of the Hebrew significance; and an assembly of free men called out of a larger population by a herald, if we contemplate the Greek significance of the term. There is much food for thought in the latter. One is tempted to dwell upon the conception of the church as an assemblage of free men—free from the curse and slavery of sin, free as the birds of the air, free because they serve God “whose service is perfect freedom;” an assemblage summoned from the four corners of the earth by the mighty voice of Jesus which has sounded, and is sounding down the ages; an assemblage summoned to transact the business of the world; for such is the mission of the church—to bring man, the world, human affairs, into harmony with the all-holy and sovereign will of God; and Christ conceived

of the Kingdom of God itself as the "universal rule of Christian principles." Such is the temptation.

But we must resist it, and dwell rather upon the primary and fundamental thought of Jesus as expressed in the word *ἐκκλησία*. At the outset we are compelled to say that it is not what is first suggested by the English word "church." The word of the evangelist meant not so much "organization," official and stereotyped, as an assemblage, a congregation, a community or brotherhood. This is the fundamental idea. The thought is plastic, pliable, more social than institutional; it is an ideal to be made real, rather than an actual to be made ideal. The word in its pristine application is far more elastic than we are wont to think. Its interpretation should be more abstract than concrete. This splendid word now stands associated most intimately with stereotyped institutionalism and creedal state ments; it is weighted with the conceptions and doctrines of later times. This ought to be avoided. The succinct yet pregnant statement of Dr. Hort is worthy of our attention: "The word 'church' carries with it associations derived from the institutions and doctrines of later times, and this cannot, at present, without a constant mental effort, be made to convey the full and exact force which originally belonged to *ἐκκλησία*."

Further, it is interesting to notice that in the early English translations of the New Testament *ἐκκλησία* was translated "congregation" and not "church." For instance, in the famous Bishop's Bible, Matt. 16:18 reads, not "Upon this rock I will build my church," but "Upon this rock I will build my congregation." It is only with the appearance of our Authorized Version in 1611 that the translation "church" wholly supplanted the more correct rendering of *ἐκκλησία*. Such facts as these bring forcibly before us the thought and idea of Jesus. He was to have a congregation, an assembly, a community or brotherhood of men. This was the great conception. Primarily, the term speaks of social or religious union. At first everything is in a more or less chaotic or disordered state—at least, an unorganized state. The reference of *ἐκκλησία* is to the time before there have arisen the inevitable results of any permanent association of men—duly constituted laws, officials, creeds, a thoroughly organized system; or, in other words, an institutional régime.

This will and must ensue. But we must be careful not to confound the later growth with the incipient stage; we must not project the late into the early. In our views of the church of Jesus let us abandon the mechanical for the vital.

Now let us turn to the recorded instances of our Lord's use of the equivalent of this word. Toward the close of his life, and therefore late in his public ministry, Jesus and the apostles were at Cæsarea-Philippi. The scene and occasion are memorable. Already the bitter hostility of the Jews against Jesus and their absolute rejection of him are in evidence. Furthermore, they are standing in the very presence of the august symbol of the Roman power in the splendid temple at Cæsarea. Jesus asks of his disciples: "Who do men say that I, the Son of man, am?" The apostles answer: "Some say that thou art John the Baptist; some Elijah, and others Jeremiah, or one of the prophets." This reply reveals but one opinion—the people do not understand him to be the Messiah. Conscious of this, Jesus addresses to them a like inquiry: "But who say *ye* that I am?" That moment was one of dramatic intensity. For long he has sought to lead them to the truth. Have his efforts failed? Now is the moment to see. Think of the suspense! But the Master has not long to wait. Peter, the impetuous and active leader and spokesman of the apostolic band, immediately replies: "Thou art the Christ, the Son of the living God." Jesus has not failed. Success is his. Here is one at least who understands. Rome may shine in her splendor, the Jewish nation spurn the Galilean peasant, the people think of him only as a prophet; but Peter, at least, is convinced that he is the Messiah and none else. It is an assured conviction—calm, mature; so mature as to be able to bear the strain of the Messiah's sufferings and death—an idea abhorrent to the Jewish mind, but advocated openly by Jesus for the first time on this occasion. Of their own will have they come to this conclusion; there has been no coercion, no persuasion. Heaven has opened their eyes, and they have seen. And now is the moment to declare the effect or consequence of this voluntary confession. "I say unto thee that thou art Peter, and upon this rock I will build my *ἐκκλησία*, and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it." There was to be a new Israel, in which Peter should be first; a community or brotherhood

of men, with Peter as the corner-stone, against which the very gates of hell, the emblem of invincibility to the ancient world, should not prevail.

This is the first explicit intimation which we have of the church. The words break suddenly from the Master's lips. They seem to presage a line of thought long entertained, and to voice an intention determined upon in silence, but now, at the opportune moment, publicly proclaimed. The *ἐκκλησία* was no new idea, no sudden fancy, but rather a mature conviction. The Christian church is no mere mechanical creation; it is a vital thing. The church is necessitated by the very nature of Christianity. Had Jesus entertained no thought of founding a church, and had he taken no steps to found one, the church would have resulted necessarily, Christianity being what it is in both life and truth. Truth tends to association and organization; life, to expression and embodiment. This is natural law. The psychologist's maxim, "All mental states are followed by activity of some sort," finds illustration here. The church would have resulted had Jesus taken no active steps consciously to utilize this law. But Jesus, here as elsewhere, puts himself into line, if we may so speak, with the laws of nature, and consciously co-operates with them, or, better, makes them serve his ends. Any great idea or thought born into the world of men attracts to itself kindred spirits, and usually becomes an organizing force. History is replete with such movements. It was inevitable, therefore, apart from any direct action of the Master, that such great ideas as those of Jesus of Nazareth should become an organizing principle in the life of the world. How naturally, too, would this be brought about when the fundamental thoughts of our Lord were the fatherhood of God and the brotherhood of man! That this truth was present to the master-intellect of Jesus we fully believe, and to it we attribute that characteristic optimism which impelled him to form only the nucleus of a society in the persons of the Twelve; and, to quote the words of England's foremost New Testament scholar, Dr. Sanday, "after the manner of the divine operations in nature, he was rather content to plant a germ with indefinite capacities of growth, than thought it necessary to fix in advance the details of organization."

Jesus at Cæsarea-Philippi had a vision, superb and glorious, of a great nation or brotherhood of men, a family of God in which the all-important thing should be the sovereignty of the law of love.

Turning now to the second and last mention of the church in the gospels, we see the aspect of brotherhood more clearly revealed. This utterance presupposes the earlier utterance. Christianity is nothing if it is not practical. When a wrong is committed against us by a Christian brother or sister, Jesus tells us that offended dignity must yield to ardent desire for reconciliation. The spiritual condition of the offender must prompt us to the rescue. "Go and tell him his fault between thee and him alone." Seek a private interview and understanding. "If he will hear thee, thou hast gained thy brother;" yes, gained him anew for the brotherhood of man. "But if he will not hear thee, take with thee one or two more, that in the mouth of two or three witnesses every word may be established." Following the Old Testament precedent of witnesses, the principle of arbitration is to be utilized. Arbitrators, disinterested, whose eyes are not blinded by passion or self-interest, who can bring moral influence to bear in effecting a settlement, and who can testify to what has occurred, must be sought. But should the offender remain obdurate, as the last resort, "tell it unto the church," the *ἐκκλησία*, the last court of appeal. It is contended by some—we think unjustifiably—that *ἐκκλησία* here is the Jewish *ἐκκλησία*; but surely, if this be true, the principle involved is no less applicable to the Christian *ἐκκλησία* or community of believers in Jesus. Should the brother not hearken to the advice and exhortation of the church, "let him be for thee"—i. e., in thy estimation—"as a heathen and a publican." In other words, he is self-excommunicated. There is to be, and there can be, no brotherly intercourse with him, for he will not act the part of a brother. The church is also informed that its decisions will be ratified in heaven. And to render the exercise of this tremendous power credible and reasonable, Jesus promises to the supplicating church—pleading for the renewal of brotherhood—divine illumination, so that the decisions of the congregation may accord with the mind of God. The ideas of the *ἐκκλησία* are here most clearly brought out by the Master; they are fellowship with God and the brotherhood of man. The sin against the church is the sin against love—love for the brethren.

If the method of Christ was followed consistently and scrupulously, what a vast step toward the peace of the world would be taken! Exercised in Christian parishes and congregations, and everywhere among Christian people, it might offend some; and others might snap their fingers in the face of all attempts at reconciliation, seeking refuge in some other parish, or denomination, to be welcomed by some ignoble, perhaps rejoicing, clergyman or minister. Thus the effort would often be rendered abortive. But should all religious bodies, parishes, and congregations rise to the height of the Master's teaching, such unseemly conduct would be impossible, and general Christian sentiment would compel to godly union and concord.

That this is the ideal of Jesus, no one can doubt; but, alas! it is far from realization. The church of Jesus Christ is today weakest in that which should be its most salient characteristic—heartfelt, unlimited brotherhood. Of theoretical brotherhood, perhaps of latent brotherhood, we have enough; but of actual, energizing brotherhood we have far too little. Within the church itself class and social distinctions—wealth, culture, education, and intelligence, and many other things—enter to mar the sense of brotherhood. Consequently the masses drift away from the church. The severest indictment ever received by the Christian church is the existence and the immense popularity of the many fraternal organizations. Conviviality and selfishness are neither the source nor the mainstay of these; indeed, their presence is a mighty protest against existing conditions, the eloquent witness to the innate craving of the human heart for brotherhood, the confession that it cannot be found in the church of Jesus Christ, and the abundant indication that men have set out to find it for themselves. Did the church of Jesus even measurably attain its ideal, their *raison d'être* would cease to exist. And, sad to relate, one of the chief forces militating against the sense of brotherhood arises from the church's failure to appreciate the essential meaning of *ἐκκλησία*. Essential means something that is necessary to the constitution or existence of a thing. The spirit of brotherhood is an essential of the church of Jesus. Orthodoxy of creed and orthodoxy of ministry are well, but orthodoxy of spirit is better. In interpreting *ἐκκλησία* primarily of ministry or creed we commit an egregious blunder. This splendid word of the gospel

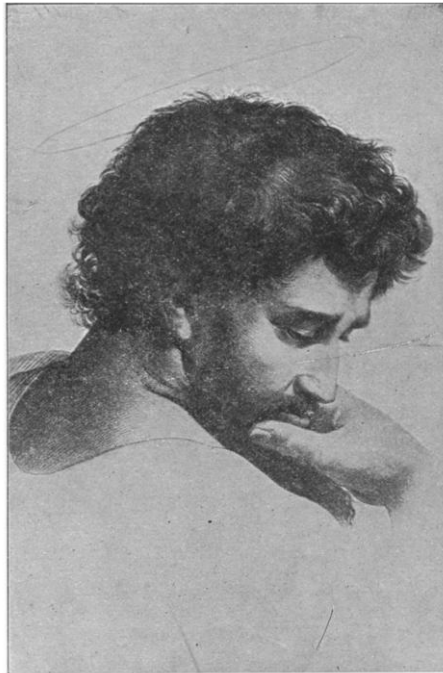
turns the thought away from the institutional and speaks of the social, the moral, the ethical; of a brotherhood, not primarily of an organization. He who best fulfils the terms of human brotherhood belongs to the true church of Christ. "He that doeth the will of my Father which is in heaven, the same is my mother and sister and brother." To do the will is to belong to the family of God: the church is the family of Gōd.

Returning to first principles, we find that *ἐκκλησία*, as used in the gospels, is comprehensive enough to include the historic churches of Christendom, the Protestant communions, and that large number of men and women who, unaffiliated with either Catholicism or Protestantism, manifest "practical recognition of the Lordship of Jesus" in their lives. The word is large enough to take in those who are frequently outside the church; to render valid the ministries now deemed invalid or irregular; to break down many figments of the ecclesiastical imagination now sundering man; and to include all, who acknowledge the messianic Lordship of Jesus, in one noble and triumphant whole. What could do more to advance this spirit of brotherhood among men than the free and full recognition of this fact? The church, which was to be the mighty embodiment and exponent of the brotherhood of man, has been, and is today, the scene of the keenest violation of that sense, and largely, as we believe, because the fundamental meaning of *ἐκκλησία* was neither understood nor borne in mind. "If the salt shall have lost its savor, wherewith shall it be salted?" The unity of the early church was due to the vivid consciousness of brotherhood; the first step toward a ministry grew out of the sense of outraged brotherhood; and if church unity is ever to come in the future, it will come, and come only, through a deepening conviction of the undeniable brotherhood of all who are seeking to possess the mind, the spirit, and the life of Jesus—brotherhood which outweighs all differences. He labors best for church unity who seeks to deepen the sense of Christian brotherhood; not he who advocates impracticable schemes which will prove but iridescent dreams.

The history of Christianity has been largely the history of misplaced emphasis; but happily the day of ecclesiasticism is passing,

and the day of vital Christianity is dawning. Prior to the Reformation we have the era of triumphant ecclesiasticism. Since the Reformation the age of creedal statement has held well-nigh sovereign sway; but signs are not wanting that our own time is witnessing an ever-increasing return to Christianity in its simplicity, its pristine power and beauty. To understand the large and generous meaning of *ἐκκλησία*, as it is used in the gospel of Matthew, is a step in that direction. It means the dissipation of prejudice; the acceptance of the true instead of the false; the placing of emphasis upon the unifying bond of brotherhood; the dethronement of invidious distinctions; the absence of all taint of insulting condescension. Above all, it will banish from the world forever that most unjustifiable and obnoxious of world-wide and omni-denominational phenomena, the prolific source of religious animosity, the inveterate opponent of brotherhood—the ecclesiastic. We mean the man who is the incarnation of provincialism; who forgets that he was a man before he was a clergyman; who, as a clergyman, takes but little interest in, and has but little to do with, the larger affairs of life—political, educational, social, temporal—remaining but a cipher in his community, so far as these are concerned; the victim of that most fallacious of heresies, the divorcing of the sacred and the secular. We mean the man who also forgets that he was a minister of Christ, pledged to his undying service and to profound sympathy with every movement for God and righteousness, from the Church of Rome, with her noble and democratic Pius X, all along the line, to the Salvation Army; pledged to these by baptism long before he assumed the ministerial yoke of his respective denomination. We mean the man who loves his sect more than his fellow-man, more than the universal priesthood of all Christians; whose eyes are blind to the distinct excellencies and achievements of other religious bodies; the man of little weight, narrow vision, circumscribed sympathy; the bane of the church, and often met with. Such a man reverses the order of nature and of chronology; he is a violation of their laws. Adequate appreciation of the essential meaning of *ἐκκλησία* would rid the world of him, and in his stead would give a band of strong, large-visioned, spiritually minded men, who would remember that

they were first men; that nothing of concern to man was foreign to them; that, secondly, they were ministers of the Lord Jesus Christ; and, last but not least, they are clergymen of their respective denominations, and that this relationship only accentuates, intensifies, and consecrates the former obligations. Such men will the *ἐκκλησία* of Jesus give us; and it means the passing forever of that hapless and hopeless mediocrity which now so often, by virtue of its very mediocrity, basks in the sunshine of ecclesiastical favor and preferment, and the elevation of that substantial worth and avowed ability which often pine and wither, unnoticed and unappreciated.



ST. PAUL

—*Raphael*